

Thought Short Report

The cult of saints and shrines in Samarqand province of Uzbekistan

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Abstract This article is focused on the issues of cult of saints and shrines in the Samarqand province of Uzbekistan. The contribution of the author to the study of shrines of the region consists of that beside the summary of the existing material on pre-Soviet and Soviet periods, he used his own data. For this, the field material was collected from some districts of Samarqand province, which allows defining the peculiarities of shrines and saints veneration in different villages. Most of them are tombs of different saints, shakhids and etc. There is a generally acknowledged hierarchy of the saints in the minds of people. Saints of various categories became worshiped. They included Ali, prominent Islamic religious figures. Heroic epic of Arabic conquests initiated the cult of 'martyrs', e.g. those who died in 'war for the belief'. The mausoleum of Khodja Daniyar is one of the unique sacred places in Samarqand. According to legends, Khodja Daniyar represents the prophet Daniel, and this place is recognized as sacred by Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Since Uzbekistan has become the independent state (1991), the citizens obtained freedom and possibility to worship saints. Pilgrimage to saint tombs is usually referred to as ziyara. Specific standard of ritual of pilgrimage to sacred places has been developed for many years. Islam also inherited the cult of various pre-Islamic local saints, heroes, in many cases legendary, and even local pagan deities that were transferred to Muslim saints.

Key word : Islam, Saints, Shrines, Samarqand, Central Asia, Uzbekistan.

The cult of saints (*awliya*) and worship of *mazar* (shrine) are widespread throughout the Islamic world. The Arabic term *wali* (plural *Awliyā*) with the meaning “to be near” is commonly translated into English as "Saint". In some way, the *wali* also acquires God’s good qualities, and therefore he possesses particular authority, forces, capacities and abilities. It is not only during his lifetime that *wali* possesses extraordinary powers. After his death, too he acts as a mediator with God, his help can be sought. His tomb confers blessings (*baraka*), which can be also be obtained through pilgrimage (Radtke 2002).

By stressing the intermediary position of the *awliya*, veneration of saints helps to bridge the gap between man and God and provides the believer with a concrete access to Allah. Moreover, cult of ancestors can smoothly be substituted by a type of veneration which is acceptable to Islam (Braukamper 2002). Saints arise to satisfy (at least) two needs – the need for an emotionally richer religion, and the requirements of social structure (Gellner 1995).

One can find the tradition of veneration of tombs of Moslem saints from Morocco and Ethiopia to Southeast Asia and Indonesia. In early Islam, it was allowed that some individuals can be saint, however but they didn’t have cults, worships or tombs. However, popular belief in mediators between the God and individuals was gradually legitimated and thus recognition of hierarchy of saints was developed. Islam lacks official apotheosis of saints like in Christianity. However, there appeared a lot of saints that received wide recognition - common or just local. Saints of various categories became worshiped. Islam also inherited the cult of various pre-Islamic local saints, heroes, in many cases legendary and even local pagan deities that were transferred to Muslim saints.

Researchers conducted on the cult of saints in Central Asia are still insufficiently explored. During Soviet period the ethnographers studying the cult of saints and connecting it with pre-Islamic notions of Central Asian peoples endeavored to prove the mythological nature of the cult (Basilov 1970). It is possible to agree with these ethnographers in many aspects; since, even preliminary studies of shrines’ peculiarities indicate that these beliefs are originated from both pre-Islamic conceptions and Islam religious traditions.

It should be noted that the cult of saints in Samarqand province, the Republic of Uzbekistan is not extensively studied. Taking into account this fact, it is necessary to give attention to the issue of the cult of saints and their role in famous shrines and concentrate on materials from different areas in Samarqand province. Some materials from adjacent provinces have been used for comparison (Mukhtor and Bobomurod 1998).

It is assumed that the cult of saints appeared in Central Asia in the 10th - 11th centuries. The example is the cult-memorial complex of Shah-i Zinda (meaning "The Living King" in Persian) in Samarqand constructed in this period at the grave of Prophet Muhammad's cousin Qusam ibn Abbas. It is known that Qusam ibn Abbas was annihilated near Samarqand in late 7th century; however, worship of his real or supposed burial place was started only three-four centuries later. He was recognized as famous pioneering missionary of Islam in the written sources. Such cases can be found in other parts of the world (Braukamper 2002).

Also it should be mentioned that graveyards with burials of the most famous Islam theologians appeared already in the 10th century. These cemeteries were gradually becoming the shrines, for example, Djakardiza graveyard in Samarqand, where the great theologian Abu Mansur al-Moturidi (853-944), Burkhan ad-din al-Marghinani (died in 1197) being the author of celebrated work on Islam jurisprudence "Hidaya" and many other outstanding Islam scholars were buried.

Numerous saints are associated with Samarqand province. Some shrines in the region are gravesites, the burial places of saints. Others are places where a saint rested or performed a miracle. In Bukhara terms such as *mazar*, 'graveyard', or *ziyoratgoh*, 'place of visit' are used about them, but they are most frequently referred to as *avliyo* or *pir* (Louw 2006). In Samarqand province the term *vali* is also used. Historically *pir* was a Sufi term, corresponding to Arabic *shaykh*. Hence the *pir* is the *murshid* or spiritual director, and may be the founder of a Sufi order or *tarika* (Bosworth 1995).

Pilgrimage to saints tombs is usually referred to as *ziyara*. Some local shrines in Pstdargom district of Samarqand province called "*eskilik joyi*" (old place in Uzbek). Pilgrimage to the tombs of particularly worshiped imams, sheikhs, and other saints is considered to be the 'Little Pilgrimage' to Mecca.

According to collected data the following persons were worshiped as saints and some places on the territory of contemporary Samarqand province, the Republic of Uzbekistan were concerned with them:

1. Members of Prophet Muhammad's family; first of all, his cousin and son-in-law – Ali, his wife – Fatima, their sons – Hasan and Husan and, especially for Samarqand, Muhammad's cousin Qusam ibn Abbas.

2. The biblical prophets Daniel, David, etc.

3. Outstanding Islam theologians of the past (Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810-870), Abu Mansur al-Moturidi (853-944), etc).

4. Well-known leaders of Sufi brotherhoods – Ubayd Allah Khoja Ahrar (1404-1490), Mahdumi A'zam (1461-1542), etc. Majority of them were representative of Naqshbandiyya brotherhood.

5. Nameless saints – ishans, sheikhs, who, obviously, were leaders of local Sufi brotherhoods. Some supernatural powers were ascribed to them. For example, according to legends Eshon buva avlie or Olovdjon eshon could stay in the middle of fire and pray or turn a river back. His shrine is in Akdarya district of Samarqand province.

6. Well-known Sufis, preachers of Islam among Central Asian nomads – Sayid ota, Badr ota, etc.

7. Buried places of *shakhids* (died as martyrs) were also places for worshipping and religious activities.

8. Graves of traditional healers (*tabibs*), who treated many people or animals and kept in people's memory. These persons are given worship by God onto the Earth to cure different diseases. For example, one of them was Balogardon bobo (in Persian "saving from disasters") curing skin diseases.

9. Saints, patrons of a profession. For example, hazrati Dovud was a patron of smiths and drivers. Saint Dekhqon bobo ("grandfather, ancestor of farmers" in Uzbek) was a patron of farmers.

10. There are also special *qadamjoi* (a place visited by a saint). For example, Chupan-ata (in Turkic “father of shepherds”) or Zangi ata was worshiped by cattle-breeders (Malikov and Mukhiddinov 2008). According to the Sufi oral tradition Zangi ata (died in 1259) was a representative of Sufi brotherhood, the disciple of Hakim Ata, Ahmad Yasawi’s famous khalifa (Zarcone 2002).

11. Some tombs of female saints are frequently visited. For example, shrine of Bibi Aysha in the south of the Samarqand province.

Many worshipping places were connected with worshiped saints mentioned in different religious books being popular among population in pre-Soviet period, and also in genealogy of Uzbek tribes and in their epos. The list of worshiped saints of Central Asian oases can be found in “Alpamysh” epos mentioning such saints as Bobo Kambar, Abdol-ota, Dakki-Yunus, Hazrati Dovud, Hazrati Daniyar and leaders of Sufi brotherhoods Yusuf Hamadani, Khoja Akhmad Yassavi, Khoja Akhrar, etc. (Alpamysh 1999).

Considering one of legendary genealogy of “Ninety-two Uzbek tribes” every Uzbek tribe had its own saint-patron named ishan. For example, the Qungrats regarded Mautui sheikh as the saint (Divaev 1900). Saints provide the cornerstone for the legal system (or perhaps one should say, arbitration system) of the lay tribes. The saints and their settlements are thus arbitrators between tribes, and between their clans, and they are physically located on important boundaries (Gellner, 1995).

There is a generally acknowledged hierarchy of the saints in the minds of people. Six levels can be differentiated:

1. Saints who are venerated in one village.
2. Saints who are popular among the population of several villages.
3. Saints who are regionally important.
4. Saints whose shrines are worshipped throughout the Samarqand province, for instance Khazrati Dovud with his *qadamjoy* (a place visited by a saint).
5. Saints whose shrines are worshipped throughout the Uzbekistan and Central Asia, for instance Makhdumi A’zam with his main sanctuary in Daghbit near Samarqand.
6. Saints whose shrines are venerated throughout the Islamic world, such as Qusam ibn Abbas, Muhammad ibn Ismoil al-Bukhori etc. Today Qusam ibn Abbas and Muhammad ibn Ismoil al-Bukhori are by far Samarqand’s most popular saints.

Ali being Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law was the most worshiped among big number of saints. Many shrines are connected with Ali in particular. The shrine with mausoleum of Ali was called Shahimardan, although in reality caliph Ali never visited Central Asian oases. People firmly believe in his presence and his activities in Central Asia. All the numerous shrines where he is said to be buried are considered to be authentic ones. In Central Asia there are several places with mausoleum of Ali. They are Shahimardan mazar in Khiva (Khorezm) vicinity, in the Ferghana Valley, etc. A roadside sanctuary named as Shahimardan is located in Gazgan village, Nurata region, Navoi province, the Republic of Uzbekistan. Sufism played significant role in propaganda of cult of Ali; in Sufism this fourth caliph and his descendants were regarded as bearers of esoteric knowledge and spiritual sanctity. Also the cult of Ali adopted many pre-Islamic notions of peoples in Central Asia. For example, there are some legends about Ali's battles with a mythical dragon in Kattakurgan district of the Samarqand province. Pre-Islamic survivals and syncretistic features in the Islam of other parts of Moslem world become obvious in the different cults (Braukamper 2002). Definitely, the population's ideology was highly influenced by popular religious works on Islam saints.

There is unique case with Saint Khoja Daniyar, whose mausoleum is one of the sacred places in Samarqand. According to legends, Khoja Daniyar represents the prophet Daniel, and this place is recognized as sacred by Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In a legend, it was reported that Amir Temur – Tamerlane (1336-1405) brought some earth from the grave of the Prophet Daniel in Iran to Samarkand.

Saint Khizr was very famous among population of Central Asian oases including settled and nomadic peoples. He was considered to be a giver of good luck, abundance, a kind patron of good people, workers and travelers. A mosque for Hazrat Khizr was erected in Samarkand in the medieval period.

Saint Khizr's associates were forty *chil'tans* – forty saints permanently helping Sufis and shamans. The area of their worship enveloped entire Central Asia, Eastern Turkestan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, etc. (Chvir 2006). *Chil'tans* were patrons of marriages and procreation, protectors of childbirth, but they were also associated with death and children's diseases.

The image of *chil'tans* is typologically closed to *childukhtaron* or *qirq-qiz* (forty maids) (Abashin 2001). There are a lot of sacred places "Childukhtaron" or "Qirq-qiz" in Samarqand and Bukhara province of Uzbekistan.

It is known that in pre-Soviet period Sufism played an important role in the spiritual life of population in Central Asia oases. Dwellers of almost every village had a Sufi spiritual teacher called *ishan*. Leaders of Sufi brotherhoods of the past were highly respected. Their supposed and real graves were points of pilgrimage.

The belief in *gayib* (“disappeared” saints) typical for Sufism existed in all places. In Kattakurgan region of Samarkand province, there is a shrine called *Goib-ota*, where a fighter for independence of his land during invasion of Tsarist Russian army disappeared. In Pakhtachi region of Samarkand province, there is one more shrine of *Goib-ota*, where saint Imam *Bakhri-ota* escaped the infidels.

Almost in every village in the Zarafshan Valley and in adjacent areas there are shrines called *mazar* in the shape of cemeteries, graves, springs, etc. Pilgrims come to see a saint and pray in order to get patronage from him. Saints’ graves attracted pilgrims due to their supposed healing abilities. Thinking of their good wishes the pilgrims tie textile bands around branches of bushes or trees.

Some scholars divide sacred sites in Uzbekistan into four distinct categories: 1. sites known throughout the Muslim world and visited by pilgrims from other countries; 2. sites known only within a particular region in Uzbekistan; 3. sites visited primarily by people of a particular occupation; and 4. new sites, which have not yet acquired renown (Abramson and Karimov, 2007). All these groups of sacred places can be found in Samarqand province. Every shrine has its own tradition of legends and histories.

Mazar of *Sayid-ota* is one of shrines worshiped by the Uzbeks in Shafirkan district of Bukhara province. According to legend sheikh *Sayid-ota* was a member of *Yassavia* brotherhood being one of Sufi branches. Considering the written source of the 15th century *Sayid-ota* was an active preacher of Islam in the Golden Horde during the rule of *Uzbek-khan* (1312-1342) (Mirzo *Ulughbek*, 1994). A legend has been written about four saints – *Sayid-ota*, *Sadr-ota*, *Uzun-ota* and *Badr-ota* looking for knowledge and visiting saints in *Surkhandarya* and *Kashkadarya* areas. Being discontent they went to saint *Zangi-ota* in *Tashkent* area. Where they received enough knowledge from him and recognized *Zangi-ota* as their teacher. *Zangi-ota* gave a staff to *Badr-ota* and told that, in a place where the staff would leaf, people would be able to settle and live. According to the legend, *Badr-ota* traveled in Central Asia and where he beat the ground by his staff a spring appeared.

In some aspects, this legend is corresponded to data from manuscript written by Nurullah ibn Ubaidallah Khorezmi telling that Zangi-ota being a pupil of Sulaiman Baqirgani (Yassavi sheikh) ordered his disciples Sayid-ota and Sadr-ota to go to *Dasht-i Qipchak* and Uzbek-khan's capital Saraichik and preach Islam (Djandarbek 2003). The legend about Sayid-ota is widely spread in many regions of Central Asia including the Samarqand province.

During Soviet period, the pilgrimage for shrines was prohibited and prosecuted by authorities. In this period shrines lost their official standing but continued to exist within the framework of popular Islam (Muminov 1996). Since Uzbekistan has become the independent state, the citizens obtained freedom and possibility to worship saints. The most important cult-memorial complexes such as Shah-i Zinda, Abu Mansur al-Moturidi, Khoja Ahrar, Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, Mahdumi A'zam and other were restored by initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan I.A. Karimov.

The shrines were visited depending on regional cultural-ecological peculiarities. Some shrines were visited on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and others during religious feasts and definite seasons. It should be underlined that ritual practice at shrines is synthesis of pre-Islam relicts and Islam traditions.

The study of cult of saints in Samarkand province, the Republic of Uzbekistan indicates that they are linked both to relicts of pre-Islam beliefs and Islam traditions. While some worshipped places are analogue to others in adjacent areas or other countries of Islam world, there are also some shrines with peculiar local characteristic features.

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